

ARTWORKS

NEA Spotlight on YMCA Writer's Voice, Billings

By Paulette Beete
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"I've always believed culture is the way to have people communicate better, whether it's art or poetry or music or literature."

– Corby Skinner

With only two part-time employees, in the past couple of years, the YMCA Writer's Voice in Billings has presented numerous readings, workshops, and classroom residencies, a Big Read program around Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, and even an annual book festival.

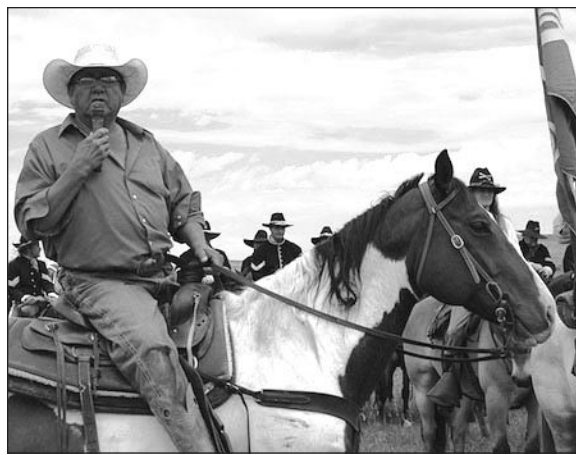
Founded in 1991 as one of the more than 30 literary arts centers at YMCAs nationwide, the Billings outpost takes its mission to support and foster the literary arts very seriously. This past spring the Billings Writer's Voice received an NEA grant to support Native Voices, which will be a series of readings by nine Native American artists from diverse Native cultures. Participating writers will include Lois Red Elk, Debra Magpie Earling, Heather Cahoon and former Montana Poet Laureate Henry Real Bird.

In his own words, here's Corby Skinner, director of the YMCA Writer's Voice in Billings, on the work the organization does and just how much they're able to accomplish with a small budget and a state's worth of creativity and imagination.

On Montana and writers

The Writer's Voice started in 1991. It was a new project of the YMCA to expand literary programs through YMCA sites across the country, and we were one of the sites for that pilot program. Because Ys are so different across the country, each center kind of evolved. In New York, there's a focus on writer's workshops and training, and that didn't fit into the mold necessarily in Billings. We don't have as many aspiring writers as the city does.

Despite the fact that there are so few people, Montana is a very literate state. We have a great tradition of fine writers from the state – Ivan Doig, Tom McGuane, Jim Welch.



Crow Indian poet and former Montana Poet Laureate Henry Real Bird is a frequent participant in activities presented by the YMCA Writer's Voice in Billings. (Photo by Corby Skinner)

So we have a literary history, but there's very little support for literary presenting here. Certainly New York publishers don't see Montana as a market because of the size and demographics.

Our programs really evolved to support regional writers. We do a lot of public readings. We have programs where we send writers and artists out into rural schools for teaching. A lot of our program is about access in a state that has six people per square mile ... It's not unusual for me to send a writer 250 miles to go do a reading somewhere.

That's just the nature of the geographic expanse of the state. Really, our focus has been to provide support for writers and access to their work in underserved communities.

On how the Big Read led to a festival of Native American writers

Two years ago we had a Big Read program here with Louise Erdrich's book, *Love Medicine*. We had a big festival involved with it that featured Native American writers. Though we didn't have a big audience for all those events, the depth of the conversation with Native writers and the quality of the work inspired me to do this grant.

I really wanted to give support for Montana Native-American writers. I'd done other programs with Joy Harjo, Alison Hedge Coke, and Diane Glancy, and Sherman Alexie's been here. But I just realized that it's so hard for Native-American authors to find an audience – even harder if you're not a well-known, well-published writer.

I wondered is there a way for us to present something that bridges cultures through work, through art? And that's what I hope to accomplish – giving exposure to the work of these writers and giving them a vehicle to present their work and find an audience and readership in a broader community.

We will be going to some of the tribal colleges – we have seven reservations and five tribal colleges in Montana – so we'll be sending these writers to some of those schools. But I also want the general public to see the quality of work we have in our Native culture.

Primarily these are indigenous people in the state. We have several tribes here, but we don't know very much about them. It gives an opportunity for understanding culture better.

And I've always believed culture is the way to have people communicate better, whether it's art or poetry or music or literature, whatever.

One of the things that's really important to us in getting recognition from the NEA is that we're a small organization. I work part-time; I have a half-time staff person. Our whole budget's about \$70K or less, yet we were ranked first in the state by the Montana Cultural Trust for the kinds of work that we do in the region.

We actually serve a really large region. It's important to get national recognition despite the very small nature of our program.

I think our scope is big, but I never pay anybody more than \$100. I do the most with the little money we have but it hasn't diminished the enthusiasm. So getting the national recognition for our program really bolsters the program within our own state. I've been on many NEA panels. The work is so good, but a lot of them are from big organizations – universities and theaters. I know the NEA focuses on quality first; they have the Challenge America grant to reach out [to smaller organizations]. I want to compete on the same stage because I really feel the work we're doing deserves recognition.

On the importance of NEA support

We're very thankful. It gives us some leverage power so when I'm applying for additional grants for the same project – whether it's from a foundation or business – I can say this has been recognized nationally as an exceptional program.



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University system observes American Indian Heritage Day Sept. 28

Montana colleges and universities, though not officially mandated to do so until last year, have been among the most visible supporters of American Indian Heritage Day (AIHD) with many hosting a day-long series of events each year. These campus celebrations have taken place on a voluntary basis for years until the Montana Board of Regents declared it an official day of observance for Montana campuses in the fall of 2011.

Each campus's AIHD activities are organized by the resident Native American department on campus and often involve Native and non-Native students alike in the organizing process.

This year's celebration is Sept. 28. To learn more, contact the following:

Montana State University-Billings: Reno Charette, American Indian Outreach, 406-657-2144; and Dan Carter, University Relations, 406-657-2269.

Montana State University-Bozeman: 406-994-5801 or diversityawareness@montana.edu.

The University of Montana: Salena Beaumont Hill at the UM Department of Native American Studies, 406-243-5834 or salena.hill@umontana.edu.

Meet the Press

An interview with Lowell Jaeger of Many Voices Press

The following is excerpted from an interview by Nin Andrews originally published in November 2011 at The Best American Poetry (blog.bestamericanpoetry.com).

Nin Andrews: Tell me about Many Voices Press. Where is it located? What kind of work are you looking for? How many books do you publish each year?

Lowell Jaeger: Many Voices Press was founded in 2005 as a nonprofit small press of Flathead Valley Community College in Kalispell ... Details concerning our press and our publications can be found at manyvoicespress.fvcc.edu.

I teach creative writing and journalism at FVCC, and basically my small office at the college doubles as the world headquarters for Many Voices Press ... We are staffed entirely by non-paid volunteers, including myself as editor and Hannah Bissell, our assistant editor.

Our guiding vision is to be of service to Montana poets, especially Native American poets, though our most recent anthology, *New Poets of the American West*, reaches

out to poets across the West.

It's difficult for poets in rural places to connect with appreciative audiences and the larger literary community. We aim to help rural poets make connections ...

Also we are in the business of expanding audiences for poetry. We are proud to say that *New Poets of the American West* generated over 50 literary events across the West, including readings at some of the region's most prominent independent bookstores.

We have received several small grants ... Having said that, the money it takes to print our books comes mostly from the generosity of people who donate cash – \$5, \$10, \$20 at a time. It's been a heartwarming experience for me to see how many people are willing to give to a good nonprofit cause.

Book sales are our second largest source of funding, though anyone who has ever run a small press knows how difficult it can be to market what you print. Large distributors ignore most small presses, especially if you're trying to sell them books of poems.

Another point of pride for our press is our commitment to the diversity of languages

in the West. *New Poets of the American West* includes poems in Spanish as well as poems in Dakota, Navajo, Assiniboiné and Salish. Victor Charlo's book, *Good Enough*, includes poems in Salish; Lois Red Elk's book, *Our Blood Remembers*, includes poems in Dakota as well as a glossary of Dakota words and phrases. There are many voices in rural places, and Many Voices Press wishes to honor them all ...

NA: How do you find the writers you publish? Or how do they find you?

LJ: For both of our anthology projects, we sent a zillion emails to individual poets, poetry orgs, writing programs, etc. ... Emails are free, and we've learned that if you ask writers to spread the word of a publishing opportunity to fellow writers, it will happen.

Arts councils in various states were helpful to varying degrees. Montana, Nevada, and Utah Arts Councils were especially willing to work with us ... Most have a newsletter that includes calls for submissions.

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